

China Education Forum

Wah Ching Centre of Research on Education in China

Website: <http://www.hku.hk/chinaed/> Vol. 4, No. 1

ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE, AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

September 2003

Most of China's 55 ethnic minorities still have levels of education attainment below the national average. Therefore, there is a need to develop innovative school practices that provide them with improved access to education and mainstream Chinese society.

...

Another challenge for ethnic minorities is to learn English as a third language. This inevitably becomes important not only for the economic development of minority communities, but also to ensure equal opportunities for ethnic minorities to study at overseas universities with the increasing number of Chinese students who do so. For example, there are a limited number of Tibetans able to speak, read, and write Tibetan, Chinese, and English. As Kevin Stuart and Shiyong Wang explain, this is due to a historic lack of access Tibetan children have had to English language classes in primary and middle schools. Yet, although the number of such schools providing classes in English is still small, as is the number of qualified Tibetan teachers-of-English, the situation is rapidly changing though an innovative educational program currently under way in western regions of China.

Editor

...

p. 19

ENGLISH TRAINING PROGRAM FOR TIBETAN STUDENTS

Kevin Stuart & Shiyong Wang

The historic importance of the program is testified by the fact that this is the first time that Tibetans of the five Tibetan regions, able to speak and write Tibetan, have been brought together to major in English, and to learn practical skills in rural development and cultural preservation.

n Students recruited from Yushu and Golok were from teacher training schools (*zhongzhuan* level). After three years of preparatory study, the students took a competitive adult education examination. The twenty-six that that passed then became part of the newly established *dazhuan* level English program within the Nationalities Department of the Qinghai Normal University. United Board provided program support for these five years, as well as support for individual teachers. Meanwhile, Trace Foundation (New York City), The Bridge Fund (San Francisco), and

the Ford Foundation (Beijing) also jumped in to provide support for other classes and teachers. While students were recruited only from Qinghai from 1997-2000, beginning in 2001, students recruitment crossed over into Tibetan regions of Sichuan and Gansu provinces. By 2002/2003, Tibetan regions of Yunnan province and the Tibet Autonomous Region were added to the list to join Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai.

In fact, recruitment is a key part of the process. In response to demand over time, the pool of target schools expanded to include middle schools as well as teacher training colleges. Students in prospective classes were asked to anonymously nominate the names of three outstanding classmates, a method already proven to provide the single best indicator of student excellence. In addition, students' marks, teachers' remarks, exam scores of competency in written and oral Tibetan and Chinese, and the results of oral interviews were considered. The resulting groups of outstanding students have also been distinguished by their motivation to complete the program.

Most students arrived with no knowledge of English. However, by the fourth semester (less than two years of study), the entire class of 30 students had little difficulty in reading and comprehending in the original *The Old Man and the Sea* (Ernest Hemingway), *The Pearl* (John Steinbeck), and equally as challenging classics. Their English language achievements testify to their motivation and quality of these students, as well as the quality of instruction, most of which is done by foreign teachers from France, New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, and the United States. Students in the preparation classes have approximately 30 hours of instruction a week including 12-14 hours of English plus courses in Tibetan language, Chinese language, and other subjects. In order to better teach students English in ways that were linguistically and culturally appropriate, foreign teachers have developed a series of English teaching materials that provide texts in both English and Tibetan, and feature Tibetan names for places and people in culturally familiar settings.

In addition to learning English, students have also been encouraged to become involved in small-scale grassroots sustainable development projects for their local communities. With assistance from foreign teachers, students successfully applied for and acquired funding. Once granted, students used funds to implement projects to build village schools, repair and provide village school equipment, provide solar cookers to rural households, construct a village bridge, water project, household pig sties, and a village shrine. In the process, these students learn how to write credible proposals, monitor and manage project finances, and write reports. Once a project is complete, students are pressured by local communities—many of which are achingly poor—to write proposals for similar projects. One example of how students have been able to employ their English language skills to write proposals has been the solar cooker project, in which funds secured by Kevin Stuart from The Canada Fund (approximately 280,000 rmb) and targeted for the “the poorest of the poor” communities in Tibet, Gansu, and Qinghai in 2003, were made available to Tibetan students in the English training program. Students were encouraged to use a project-developed fact-finding questionnaire (in English and Tibetan). A total of 40 students applied for grants and their local communities will receive funds for solar cookers, and students are responsible for writing the final report about the results. In July 2003, a polytechnic (*dazhuan*) graduate with a second year student visited each site and wrote reports before September 2003. These projects convince students that learning English is more than an abstract mastery of odd sounds and grammar patterns, but something that can benefit their local communities.

Interested students are also encouraged to become involved with cultural preservation efforts. This includes folklore collection in audio and video format, transcription of the material in Tibetan with IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), and translation into English. Such efforts have been assisted by Toni Huber (Humboldt University, Germany), Charlene Makley (Reed College, USA), Krisodawan Hongladarom (Chulalongkorn University, Thailand), Marielle Prins (Southwest Nationalities Institute-China), and Alexandru Anton-Luca (independent scholar).

Recognizing the need for further English training for *dazhuan* program graduates, the Nationalities Department enrolled a class of 26 students in March 2004 for a two-year program that, once successfully completed, will provide graduates with a BA degree in English. Upon graduation, this will be the first class of students fluent in oral and written Tibetan and oral and written Chinese to earn BA degrees in China.

What do students do after graduation? Most of the *dazhuan* graduates of the program in 2002 are currently teaching English in the countryside. Three are working for Doctors of the World on a health care project in a rural Tibetan area, one works for The Bridge Fund, and one works as a program assistant for the English teaching program within the Nationalities Department.

At the end of the 2002-2003 school year, the program had approximately 210 students in five preparation (*zhongzhuan*) level classes and two *dazhuan* classes. Nine foreign teachers taught all the English classes either on a part-time or full-time basis.

The historic importance of the program is testified by the fact that this is the first time that Tibetans of the five Tibetan regions, able to speak and write Tibetan, have been brought together to major in English, and to learn practical skills in rural development and cultural preservation. Recognizing the critical importance of the program—to furnish Tibetan teachers of English and rural community activists to rural Tibetan areas—the United Board has provided funds for sending three *dazhuan* graduates of the program to the Philippines for two years of further study. When these young Tibetans return, they will become the first local Tibetan teachers of English in the Nationalities Department of Qinghai Normal University. Further support for such English training projects will, we hope, replace the need for foreign English teachers, making the English Training Project truly sustainable.

---Kevin Stuart and Shiyong Wang are affiliated with the Nationalities Department, Qinghai Normal University, Xining, Qinghai, China.

Kevin Stuart's email: ckstuart@public.xn.qh.cn

Shiyong Wang's email: wangsh@public.xn.qh.cn